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Spotlight interview with Imelda López (CGTG-Guatemala)

"My son will lose his job if anyone finds out that his mother is a trade union leader"

Brussels, 6 November 2009 (ITUC OnLine): Relentless threats and murders... Guatemala is witnessing an intensification of trade union rights violations. Imelda López, general secretary of the civil aviation workers' union, assistant general secretary of the CGTG (1) and the public services federation, has already suffered three attempts on her life. She recounts the day-to-day realities of trade unionists in Guatemala and, following on from her recent participation in the first ITUC World Women's Conference (2), she speaks of the specific difficulties faced by women workers, especially in export processing zones.

In January 2008, during the Trade Union Conference against Impunity in Guatemala, the newly-elected president, Alvaro Colom, expressed his commitment to social justice and genuine rule of law in Guatemala. How has the trade union rights situation evolved since then?

Trade union rights violations have escalated since this new government came to power. We are going back to the same extremes as in the eighties. We are looked upon as terrorists. We are faced with terrible violence and murder. Since the Guatemalan labour, indigenous and campesino movement (3) was restructured in 2008, 36 of its members have been murdered (4). Some of them had received death threats. The threats are continuing: shots were recently fired at the houses of two other trade unionists. This year, the assistant general secretary of the CGTG, Victoriano Zacarías Míndez, who had already been imprisoned for his trade union activities, was abducted. He managed to escape his abductors by jumping from their car (5).

Workers organise a union in secret, but when they start the procedures to register it with the Labour Ministry, the employer finds out who the leaders are before the Ministry even has time to make a decision, and they are dismissed.

You yourself have been confronted with serious intimidation...

I have already suffered three attempts on my life. In 2005, I was almost killed: shortly after leaving the CGTG in my car, I heard a noise and suddenly lost control of the vehicle, which turned over several times and was completely wrecked. I was injured and had to have skin grafts, but I was lucky to have come out of the accident alive. Investigations revealed the car had been sabotaged; one of the parts had been filed down.

I've been subjected to further acts of intimidation since then. In 2007, for example, I met up with a group of activists in a restaurant following a trade union activity to promote respect for maternity rights. Five minutes

after arriving there, I was told that my car windows had been smashed. Nothing was stolen, but the doorman told me he'd noticed that a van had been following me. Trade union leaders often receive warnings of this kind.

There is a black list with the names of independent trade unionists; it is widely circulated and makes it impossible to find a job. In my case, I have been working in the civil aviation authority for 33 years, and have been a trade unionist for the last 12. It's hard to imagine that the public service would fire me for being a trade union activist, but I have to work really hard, and do much more than the normal hours, to make up for the time devoted to trade union activities.

Does your family approve of your involvement in the trade union?

My son recently started to work, but he is living in fear, because if anyone finds out that his mother is a trade union leader, he will lose his job. It's difficult at family level, because my children do not support my involvement. On the contrary, they reproach me for it at times; they ask me to leave the union, as it is not only putting my own life at risk, but theirs too. They say that it's good to fight for others, but if I disappear, there will be no one to look after them.

What satisfaction do you get from your involvement, in spite of everything?

It is my vocation to help others. Putting myself at other people's service makes me feel useful, especially when I am able to help those with fewer possibilities than I have in the defence of their rights.

Is it difficult for a woman to move up the hierarchy in the Guatemalan trade union movement?

Women are demanding more space in the trade union movement, in its decision making, but they often fail to take up this space, for lack of time most often. Time is needed for the training and education required to become a trade union leader (including self-education). Combining family life, work and trade union activities is really difficult. Women are willing to get involved in trade union activities during working hours but, beyond that, many of them have no other choice but to go home to look after their children.

Machismo is still very present in Guatemala, as it is elsewhere in Latin America. I have had to work harder than the men to prove my worth and secure a position in the trade union leadership structure. Women often have a tendency not to help one another, if not to bring each other down. There is still a lot of work to be done in terms of raising women's consciousness of their rights. There is no visible barrier within my confederation to women moving up the ladder, but they prohibit themselves certain activities, giving priority to their family lives.

When I became one of the leaders of the aviation union, I was the only woman. I have helped others climb the ladder and, now, five out of the nine members of the executive committee are women, and that's in a union that has only 45 women out of a total membership of 380.

What are the priorities of the CGTG Women's Committee, which you head?

The number one priority is the fight for equal pay and decent pay. Women working in export processing zones earn as little as 100 to 120 dollars a month, working 12 hours a day, sometimes seven days a week. According to the CGTG's calculations, at least 400 dollars is needed to live a decent life. Our committee is also campaigning to improve women's working conditions, especially in the EPZs, and to protect their maternity rights. We have also done a lot of campaigning in favour of domestic workers, and with good results because Guatemala has just passed a law giving them access to social security. Another priority is to promote women's education, as it is women that have the most difficulty accessing training.

You took part in the first ITUC World Women's Conference. What did you take away from it?

The exchanges between women trade unionists from all around the world were very enriching; I learnt a great deal from listening to all the testimonies, although I would have liked more time for the participants to express themselves. I was really pleased about the impact young women had on the conference, it's very important to prepare for the future. In spite of the marks left by some trade union divisions from the past and all the different languages and origins, we have to overcome our differences and deliver a common message if we want to succeed in our fight against inequalities. The Conference demonstrated that we are capable of working as a team, we must continue along this path of solidarity. The ITUC now has to ensure that the Conference resolutions and decisions are followed up on and implemented. Having said that, I find it a shame that at this stage, when there is so much talk of gender equality, we are still organising seminars for women only. It would be better to involve men in these activities.

How has the global economic crisis affected the world of work in Guatemala?

Most workers in Guatemala were already living in a crisis situation before the onset of the global economic crisis, but it has, of course, made things worse, especially for women, who have the greatest difficulties accessing the labour market. We have seen a 100% rise in fuel prices since the beginning of the crisis. The overall cost of living is rising, but isn't compensation for with rises in our miserable wages. Only the top public servants have been given pay rises, thanks to their connections with the people in power.

Why do women have less access to the labour market?

The workplaces where we have seen the most visible fall in employment are the EPZs, where the majority of the workforce is female. Many employers in the zones are using the crisis as a pretext for dismissing up to 50% of their staff. The anti-union repression is very tough in these zones, which are mainly host to garment factories. Only two unions have been able to form there. It is easy to dismiss workers when they have no trade union protection.

Another reason for women being the hardest hit by the crisis is the fact that most of them work in the informal economy, which has been badly affected by the rise in the cost of merchandise. There too, they find themselves in a situation of total vulnerability, without any protection.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) Central General de Trabajadores de Guatemala

(2) The first ITUC World Women's Conference was held in Brussels from 19 to 21 October 2009, under the heading "Decent Work, Decent Life for Women". For more information: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article4552&lang=en>

(3) Movimiento Sindical Indígena y Campesino Guatemalteco - MSICG

(4) After this interview was conducted, another member of the MSICG, Víctor Gálvez, was assassinated. He was savagely shot down by an unknown assailant on 25 October. See <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article4571&lang=en>

(5) See <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article3828&lang=en>

Also see the Union View devoted to trade union rights violations in Guatemala, April 2008, at:
http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/VS_Guatemala_EN.pdf

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